



September 17, 2015

PAPER TIGERS



I had the opportunity to see this documentary at a free screening at the California Endowment. *Paper Tigers* chronicles a year in the lives of high school students at Lincoln High School. The school is a continuation school for troubled students with behavioral issues who live in Walla Walla Washington. These are our foster kids and our abused kids. What is special about this film is that the kids are not presented as victims but as people with talents and abilities who are capable of change.

The entire school staff from the principal and teachers to the janitors were educated and sensitized to how these youth have had a series of Adverse Childhood Experiences, (ACEs). By understanding the impact of these experiences on behavior, thought process and learning ability, everyone at Lincoln High learned how to see behaviors differently. Instead of expelling youth, the school surrounded them with support, caring and nonjudgmental guidance. It felt like going to school if Carl Rogers ran it.

By educating the kids on how and why their experiences as children impact their current behavior, they were able to get the kids to buy into the supportive environment. Instead of focusing on what the kids were doing, the focus shifted to why they were acting out and helping them see the connections, so they could begin to make better choices to overcome those ACEs. Gone were the labels of: out-of-control, oppositional-defiant or conduct-disordered.

Instead, you had people who cared enough to show up at a kid's house when he didn't make it to school, and who stayed with them and sat with intention after school rather than putting them into detention where little effort is made to resolve the underlying needs or issues that led to the behavior in the first place. The concept of "there is something wrong with these kids" was replaced by "because these bad things happened to them, they have learned to behave badly". Lincoln High became a place where kids have a chance to be heard and held in a safe place where they can heal, grow and achieve. As the kids began to feel valued, their behaviors improved significantly.

I want all kids to go to a school like this. Where fighting and bullying decrease, graduation rates increase and where youth have opportunities to heal and learn at the



same time. And, I want parents to have the same education about their own ACEs so they don't keep making the same unhealthy choices.

The ACE Study is an ongoing collaborative research project between the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention in Atlanta, GA, and Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, CA. The co-principal investigators of the study are Robert F. Anda, MD, MS, (CDC) and Vincent J. Felitti, MD (Kaiser Permanente).

Over 17,000 Kaiser patients participating in routine health screening volunteered to participate in the study. Data resulting from their participation continues to be analyzed; it reveals staggering proof of the health, social and economic risks that result from childhood trauma. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) provides access to the peer-reviewed publications resulting from The ACE Study.

After seeing the impact and the results of incorporating education and sensitivity to ACEs in the health and educational forays, I cannot help but wonder how much more impact we could make by attending more closely to these events in our mental health system.

Trauma-informed and evidence-based practices do help individuals deal with their traumatic events. But, what if we had a comprehensive system that was better integrated, where all providers from all systems, disciplines and departments were committed to educating themselves and the people they serve about how ACEs can impact health, substance use and mental health?

Knowing how to counteract the effects of ACEs over a lifetime can give anyone the ability and resilience to learn, grow and develop healthy relationships. Understanding the impact of ACEs can be a life-changing step that can move people closer to a life of hope, wellness and recovery. *Paper Tigers* is a good example of this. I give it five golden tickets.

